

A Misunderstood passage in Gregory Nazianzen's

XXXVIIIth Oration (*De Nativitate*) ?

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In *Or.* 38, 8 (*PG* 36, 320A7-14) Gregory of Nazianzus discusses the infinity of God in the following words¹:

Διχῇ δὲ τοῦ ἀπείρου θεωρουμένου, κατὰ τε ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος (τὸ γὰρ ὑπὲρ ταῦτα, καὶ μὴ ἐν τούτοις, ἄπειρον), ὅταν μὲν εἰς τὸν ἄνω βυθὸν ὁ νοῦς ἀποβλέψῃ, οὐκ ἔχων ὅποι στή καὶ ἀπερείσῃται ταῖς περὶ Θεοῦ φαντασίαις, τὸ ἐνταῦθα ἄπειρον καὶ ἀνέκβατον, ἀναρχον προσηγόρευσεν· ὅταν δὲ εἰς τὰ κάτω καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς, ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον· ὅταν δὲ συνέλῃ τὸ πᾶν, αἰώνιον.

The absence of limit is contemplated in two ways, with regard to the beginning and to the end, for that which is above both and is not contained between them is without limit. When the mind gazes steadfastly into the depth above, not having a place to stand and relying on the representations it has of God, from this perspective it names as “without beginning” that which is without limit and without outlet. Yet when it gazes at what is below and what is subsequent, it names it “immortal” and “indestructible”; and when it views the whole together, “eternal”.

(T. Harrison)²

Gregory's point is obvious: the divine is infinite with regard to both the beginning and the end; having no beginning (when one looks upwards for it, εἰς τὸν ἄνω βυθὸν), it is called “without beginning”, and having no end (when one looks downwards and beyond, εἰς τὰ κάτω καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς), it is called “immortal”.

Neither theologically nor philosophically is there anything new in this passage, and its meaning had always seemed absolutely clear to me until I came across the following scholion by Basilios Minimus (*Comment. in Greg. Naz. Or. XXXVIII*, schol. 76)³:

¹ This passage is textually identical to *Greg. Naz. Or.* 45, 4 (*PG* 36, 628B7-14).

² N.V. Harrison, «Gregory Nazianzen, Homily on the Nativity of Christ», in: R. Valantasis (ed.), *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* (Princeton – Oxford, 2000), p. 447.

διχῇ δὲ τοῦ ἀπείρου θεωρουμένου· ἄπειρον καὶ δυσθεώρητον προσθείς· πρὸς τὸ δεύτερον πρῶτον ἀπαντήσας, νῦν τὸ πρῶτον διασαφεῖ. Τοῦ δὲ ἀπείρου διχῶς νοουμένου· ἢ γὰρ κατὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν λέγεται τὸ ἄπειρον, ἢ κατὰ τὸ τέλος· τὸ θεῖον καθ' ἑκάτερον τούτων νοεῖται ἄπειρον. Ὅταν γὰρ εἰς τὸ ἄνω ἀδιεξίτητον τῆς ἀρχῆς πέλαγος ὁ ἀνθρώπινος ἀποβλέψῃ νοῦς καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖ ζητῶν φαντασθῇ μὴ ὄρον τε στάσιμον εὐρίσκων τῆς ὅθεν ἤρξατο ἀρχῆς τὸ ἐνταῦθα ἄπειρον καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς, ὅταν δὲ εἰς τὰ κάτω τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀπείρου πάλιν ἀπίδοι καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς (εἰεν δὲ ταῦτα τὰ ἐξῆς τὰ ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ κείμενα κῶλῳ ᾧ καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ δευτερολογεῖν ἠνίξατο διὰ τοῦ ἐξῆς ὥς εἶναι τὸ ὅλον οὕτως· ὅταν δὲ εἰς τὰ κάτω ἀποβλέψῃ ὁ νοῦς δηλαδὴ οὐκ ἔχων ὅποι στή καὶ ἀπερείσηται ταῖς περὶ Θεοῦ φαντασίαις), τὸ ἐνταῦθα πάλιν ἄπειρον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον προσηγόρευσεν.

The absence of limit is contemplated in two ways: he [sc. Greg. Naz.] has put together “limitless” and “difficult to contemplate”; having first treated the second point [cf. PG 36, 320A1], he now makes clear the first one. “Limitless” is considered in two ways: for the “limitless” is spoken of either according to the beginning or according to the end; the divine is conceived as limitless according to both of them. For when the human mind gazes up into the impassable ocean of the beginning and seeks to imagine what is there, not finding a fixed boundary where the beginning has begun, it names [“as without beginning] that which is without limit etc.”. Also, when it gazes down into the depths of the same limitless space etc. (and this “etc.” would be what lies in the first part which, for the sake of not repeating himself, he implies in the word “etc.”, so that the whole is [to be understood] like this: and when the mind gazes down into the depths, obviously “not having a place to stand and relying on the representations it has of God”), again it names this limitless part of divinity “immortal and indestructible”.

Basilios' commentary is little more than a paraphrase of Gregory's text. What is new, however, is his interpretation of the words καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς used by Gregory in the second part of his sentence: according to him they simply mean “etc.” and refer to words of the first part of the sentence which Gregory did not want to repeat. To make it visually more clear, here is how Gregory's sentence should be understood according to Basilios:

When the mind gazes steadfastly into the depth above, not having a place to stand and relying on the representations it has of God, from this perspective it names as “without beginning” that which is without limit

³ Text according to T.S. Schmidt, *Basili Minimi in Gregorii Nazianzeni Orationem XXXVIII commentarii*, CCG, 46; Corpus Nazianzenum, 13 (Turnhout-Leuven, 2001), pp. 58-60. For the English translation I warmly acknowledge the help of Brian Matz (Saint-Louis University). Little is known about Basilios Minimus: he was bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia in the tenth century and wrote commentaries on all of Gregory Nazianzen's orations, of which only five have been edited so far: four in the *PG*, vol. 36 (on *Or.* 4, 5, 7 and 25) and one (on *Or.* 38) in *CCG* (cf. above). *Status quaestionis* in: T.S. Schmidt, « Les Commentaires de Basile le Minime: liste révisée des manuscrits et des éditions », *Byz* 70 (2000), 155-181, and in the introduction to my edition (cf. above).

and without outlet. Yet when it gazes at what is below **etc.** (= not having a place to stand and relying on the representations it has of God, from this perspective) it names it “immortal” and “indestructible”.

Instead of meaning “at what is below and what is subsequent”, εἰς τὰ κάτω καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς would thus simply mean “at what is below etc.”. Basilus' interpretation is certainly intriguing and makes it worthwhile to check how other translators have understood this expression.

PG 36 (1858) ⁴	“ad inferiora et posteriora”
Röhm (1874) ⁵	“in die Tiefe und in die Zukunft”
Aureli-Brunner (1913) ⁶	“agli esseri inferiori e poscia venuti”
Bonnes (1949) ⁷	“en bas jusqu'au plus profond”
Browne-Swallow (1955 [1894]) ⁸	“into the depths below, and at the future”
Michels (1956) ⁹	“unten hin und Stück für Stück in rechter Ordnung”
Devolder-Becquet (1962) ¹⁰	“vers les choses terrestres et ce qui s'y tient”
Quéré-Jaulmes (1963) ¹¹	“vers le bas et [en scrute] les profondeurs”
Moreschini (1983) ¹²	“verso le realtà che sono in basso e quello che viene dopo”
Gallay (1990) ¹³	“vers ce qui est en bas et vers ce qui suit”
Moreschini (2000) ¹⁴	“verso le realtà che sono in basso e quello que viene poi”
Harrison (2000) ¹⁵	“at what is below and what is subsequent”

Although these translations are far from unanimous (in itself a sign that there is a problem here), it is immediately clear that none of the translators understood the expression in the way Basilus did. This fact raises the question of whether Basilus' rendering of καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς is at all possible in Greek, but

⁴ PG. 36, 319A14.

⁵ J. Röhm, *Ausgewählte Schriften des hl. Gregor von Nazianz* (Kempten, 1874), pp. 18 and 96.

⁶ A. Aureli and G. Brunner, *La voce dei SS. Padri. Brani patristici scelti di dottrina ed eloquenza sacra*, vol. II, (Milan, 1913), p. 491.

⁷ J.-P. Bonnes, *Homélie patristique* (Paris, 1949), p. 198.

⁸ C.G. Browne and J.E. Swallow, “Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen”, in: LNP NF, Second Series 7, pp. 347 and 424.

⁹ T. Michels, *Gregor von Nazianz. Die Macht des Mysteriums. Sechs geistliche Reden an den Hochtage der Kirche* (Düsseldorf, 1956), p. 24

¹⁰ E. Devolder and T. Becquet, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze. Homélie 38, 39, 40, 1, 45, 41* (Namur, 1962), p. 124.

¹¹ A. Hamman and F. Quéré-Jaulmes, *Le Mystère de Noël* (Paris, 1963), p. 148.

¹² C. Moreschini, *Gregorio Nazianzeno. Omelie sulla Natività (Discorsi 38-40)* (Rome, 1983), p. 50.

¹³ C. Moreschini and P. Gallay, *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 38-41, SC 358* (Paris, 1990), p. 119.

¹⁴ C. Moreschini, *Gregorio di Nazianzo. Tutte le orazioni* (Milan, 2000), pp. 887 and 1139.

¹⁵ Cf. note 2.

there can be no doubt about it: καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς with the meaning of “etc.” is perfectly good Greek and is well attested in Greek literature and in the papyri, though it has of course other meanings, too¹⁶.

But would Gregory have used it with this meaning? Investigations through the *TLG* or, more conveniently, with the help of the concordance to Gregory's works¹⁷, yield some interesting results¹⁸. If one leaves aside our passage from *Or.* 38.8 and its repetition in *Or.* 45.4, there are 12 further occurrences of καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς in Gregory's works: in 6 cases, it has the meaning of “etc.” (and in 5 of them it comes immediately after a quotation), and in the 6 other cases it means “and that which follows (that is, the sequel) of my thought (story, text, or the like.)”. A further case with the meaning of “etc.” may be added from *Or.* 44 (PG 36, 612A4-5): the *TLG* has καὶ τὸ ἐξῆς, but the reading in the *Patrologia Graeca* is καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς, and again it is used right after a quotation.

Widening the search to the uses of τὰ ἐξῆς (without καὶ), one finds out that there are 25 occurrences of that expression, of which an overwhelming majority (19) have the meaning of “the sequel of my thought (story, text, and so forth.)”. Of the remaining 6, 2 have the meaning of “then, next, afterwards”, 2 others mean “the rest” (of something), 1 “the consequence” (of an attitude) and 1 “the state that comes after” (that is, death).

Yet a further widening of the search shows that of 17 uses of τὸ ἐξῆς (in the singular), besides the one occurrence just mentioned in the sense of “etc.”, 10 have the meaning “the sequel of my thought (and so forth)”, while 2 mean “next, then, afterwards”, and 4 “the sequel” (of something (the road, the wrath, and so on)).

And finally, used on its own, ἐξῆς twice means “next, then, afterwards” and is used 5 times almost as an adjective to mean “following, future” (events and so on).

¹⁶ See *LSJ* (1996), s.v. (with supplement).

¹⁷ J. Mossay and CETEDOC, *Thesaurus Sancti Gregorii Nazianzeni, Orationes, Epistulae, Testamentum, Corpus Christianorum, Thesaurus Patrum Graecorum* (Turnhout-Leuven, 1990).

¹⁸ Due to lack of space, references to the relevant passages cannot be listed here.

To sum up - not only are there 6 instances out of 12 (or 7 out of 13, see above) where καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς takes exactly this meaning of “etc.”, as Basilus would have us interpret it, but there is also an overwhelming majority of cases where Gregory uses τὰ ἑξῆς in the sense of “the sequel of my thought (and so on)”, which comes also very close to what Basilus is saying. This cannot, of course, be taken as a decisive argument, but it increases by far the likelihood of Basilus' interpretation.

A further argument may possibly come from the ancient translations of Gregory's works. As is well known, Gregory's orations were translated into various ancient languages of the Near East and it may be interesting to look at how these translators understood Gregory's text¹⁹:

Latin (Rufinus) ²⁰		“ad inferiora et ad ultima”
Armenian ²¹		“at what is below and what is in (subsequent) order”
Syriac ²²	(38: S2)	“at what is below and later”
	(45: S1, Sm, S2)	“at what is below and what (comes) later”
Arab ²³	(38: 1 + 2)	“at what is lower and what (comes) after”
	(38: 1')	“at what is lower and what (comes) with it”
	(38: 3)	“at what is lower and with the rest”
	(45)	“into the depths at the lower end, into the future”
		+ addition in first colon (38 + 45)
Georgian ²⁴	(Mravalt'avi A)	[lacuna]
	(Mravalt'avi T)	[not translated]
	Euthymos	“into the depth which is beneath and similarly cannot find a place to stand”

¹⁹ For this section I acknowledge the help of my former colleagues from the *Centre d'études sur Grégoire de Nazianze* at Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium): Prof. Bernard Coulie and Ignace Baise (Armenian), Prof. Jean-Claude Haelewyck and Dr. Matthias Quashning (Syriac), Laurence Tuerlinckx (Arabic), Prof. Bernard Coulie and Dr. Maia Matchavariani (Georgian).

²⁰ A. Engelbrecht, *Tyrannii Rufini orationum Gregorii Nazianzeni novem interpretation* (Leipzig, 1910), p. 94.

²¹ The Armenian translation (5th c.) of *Or.* 38 and 45 has not yet been edited.

²² Three different Syriac translations exist: S1 (5th c.), Sm (6th c.) and S2 (623/624). *Or.* 38 is attested only in S2, *Or.* 45 in all three. All are yet to be published.

²³ There are four different versions of the Arabic translation of *Or.* 38 (10th c.), yet to be published. For *Or.* 45, see L. Tuerlinckx, *Sancti Gregorii Nazianzeni Opera, Versio arabica antiqua, II. Orationes I, XLV, XLIV (arab. 9, 10, 11)*, CCG 43; Corpus Nazianzenum, 10 (Turnhout-Leuven, 2001), pp. 59 and 61.

²⁴ The Georgian translations are dated as follows: Mravalt'avi A and T (10th c.), Euthymos (11th c.), Ephrem (12th c.). Cf. H. Metreveli *et al.*, *Sancti Gregorii Nazianzeni Opera, Versio iberica, I. Orationes I, XLV, XLIV, XLI*, CCG 36; Corpus Nazianzenum, 5 (Turnhout-Leuven, 1998), pp. 36-7; H. Metreveli *et al.*, *Sancti Gregorii Nazianzeni Opera, Versio iberica, III. Oratio XXXVIII*, CCG 45; Corpus Nazianzenum, 12 (Turnhout-Leuven, 2001), pp. 16-17 and 74-5.

The Latin, Armenian, and Syriac translations render the expression as most modern ones, that is, with the meaning of “and what follows”. So does the Arab translation, which is interesting, however, because of an addition in the first part of the sentence: in *Or.* 38.8, the translator of version 1 added “(when the mind gazes) into the upmost depths *that preceded*”, and in *Or.* 45.4, one reads “into the upper depths, *into what precedes*” (that is, “*into the past*”). The Arabic translators were obviously uncomfortable with the unbalanced structure of the sentence and made this addition in order to create a parallelism to καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς in the second part. They nevertheless understood the whole passage like the other ancient translators.

Euthymos' Georgian translation of the eleventh century, however, is quite exciting, because it renders the text exactly in the way Basilios Minimus had explained it, that is, by adding that first part of the sentence which Gregory had, according to him, deliberately left out. At last, then, it seems that one other person understood the text in the same way as Basilios. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm arising from this discovery must be tempered because it appears that Euthymos produced translations not only of Gregory's orations, but also of Basilios Minimus' commentaries, so it is likely that he did not come up with his translation of this passage independently, but was influenced by Basilios' scholion²⁵.

Despite the very interesting testimonium of Euthymos, there is still no decisive proof, then, that Basilios' interpretation is correct, hence the questionmark in the title of this paper. My discomfort about the whole matter is further increased by the fact that I would probably never have thought of this passage as awkward in any way had I not come across Basilios' scholion. However, I take some confidence from the fact that this interpretation, as we have seen, is in perfect agreement with

²⁵ T. Otkhmezouri, “The Influence of the Commentaries of the Georgian Translations of the Works of Gregory of Nazianzus”, in: *Philological Researches*, II, K. Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Georgia (Tbilisi, 1995), pp. 150-163 (in Georgian, with summary in English).

Gregory's uses of καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς elsewhere in his works, and also from the fact that, with Basilus, Euthymos and myself, this makes at least three of us, and hopefully a few more by now, to be convinced that this is how Gregory's text should be understood.